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The Song of Zazen
by Hakuin Ekaku Zenji

All sentient beings are essentially Buddhas. As with water and ice, there is no ice without water; apart from sentient beings, there are no Buddhas. Not knowing how close the truth is, we seek it far away--what a pity! We are like one who in the midst of water cries out desperately in thirst. We are like the son of a rich man who wandered away among the poor. The reason we transmigrate through the Six Realms is because we are lost in the darkness of ignorance. Going further and further astray in the darkness, how can we ever be free from birth-and-death? As for the Mahayana practice of zazen, there are no words to praise it fully. The Six Paramitas, such as giving, maintaining the precepts, and various other good deeds like invoking the Buddha's name, repentance, and spiritual training, all finally return to the practice of zazen. Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away. If we listen even once with open heart to this truth, then praise it and gladly embrace it, how much

more so then, if on reflecting within ourselves we directly realize Self-nature, giving proof to the truth that Self-nature is no-nature. We will have gone far beyond idle speculation. The gate of the oneness of cause and effect is thereby opened, and not-two, not-three, straight ahead runs the Way. Realizing the form of no-form as form, whether going or returning we cannot be any place else. Realizing the thought of no-thought as thought, whether singing or dancing, we are the voice of the Dharma. How vast and wide the unobstructed sky of samadhi! How bright and clear the perfect moonlight of the Fourfold Wisdom! At this moment what more need we seek? As the eternal tranquility of Truth reveals itself to us, this very place is the land of Lotuses and this very body is the body of the Buddha.

Ichiza wo ko o nasu hito mo
Tsumi shi muryo no tsumi
horobu
Akushu izuku ni ari nu beki
Jodo sunawachi to karazu

“Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away”

Hakuin Zenji writes on samadhi again and again and this time he writes how even if we sit one period of zazen we will be able to be free from all karma endlessly. We most often live our daily lives in a state of mind concerned with winning and losing, gain and loss. This produces many thoughts which we cling to and our mind is not quiet. Like the world today, where so many ugly things happen, things hard to look at, things changing so quickly, people's hearts being deeply hurt, we can see how full of thinking we all are. But if we do even one period of zazen, even if we sit for one period or for one hour, if we take the time to sit, somehow, for some reason, we are able to separate from all that thinking. Even if we wouldn't say that we are completely quiet, we can at least become a state of mind where we don't need to put so many, many thoughts into our mind. They become fewer and we are able to discover a self which is not so shaken by all that thinking.

Ever since the terrorist incident on the 11th of September this year, the whole world has fallen into the deepest pit of fear. People's minds are full of anger and terror, and can find no settled place, feeling as if they are in a hell. With this insecurity, this misery and deep fear, people are all the more focused on the media. The media, knowing this, writes and produces even more material that frightens and worries us.

On the day of the incident of September 11th I was at the One Drop Zendo of Itteki Tahoma Monastery. It was the sixth day of sesshin. On that sixth day of sesshin we received limited reports of the incident and everyone continued the sesshin, sitting constantly and consistently. Without exception all fifty people finished the sesshin together. People everywhere were tied to the television and the more they watched, the more fearful and insecure they became, truly pulled around by what was reported. Right within that, the sesshin members continued with their deepest concentration. Of course there were many who knew that their close friends and relatives were affected but each one felt clearly what was most important to do at that very moment. I am sure that people who were not at the sesshin received their energy and their way of being and were able to depend on them and become more settled themselves.

Of course, we do sesshin in a place that is isolated from society and each person returns

to society at the close of sesshin. There is much confusion met with on return, but how will we respond to that confusion, to such a volume of information? Will we increase our thinking and take on those confused thoughts or will we be settled? Which will it be?

Will we take on so much more thinking again –or can we actually stay in that confused situation with our thoughts decreased? For someone who has had this experience, although being involved in this challenging situation is unavoidable, one can carefully consider the way of responding to it. Just as Hakuin says, "Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away".

When there are so many varieties of reports and information, without running away from that actuality, how should we respond in a clear, objective state of mind to this information? In what way should we look at these reports and how should we evaluate things? Seeing this clearly is what is most important.

Doing zazen is not turning our backs on society but looking straight at human's greatest truth. What is true? Is it true that we should attack other people? Is that what is true? To not go against our truth, to act in truth, see in this in the best and correct way. While zazen looks like we are turning our backs on events, it is not at all like this. People are always bringing forth varieties of information, we need to be able to see clearly what is true and act accordingly. There has to be at least one person who does that or there will be no true liberation of people.

It is not about leaving the world and going off to some isolated place where we live out of touch with what is going on, but rather that we should work right in the middle of society. While carrying the miseries of all people be strong and sturdy, living the truthful way without deceiving anyone. Live honestly. This is what is most important and zazen is its source.

To leave society and turn our back on it is not the point, instead to be in the very midst of gain and loss and winning and losing. In those tangled events and complex circumstances, our mind stays deep in its quiet and does not lose that.

To realize this we cannot do vague zazen. When we do zazen we have to have the courage to throw away everything. In the sutra of Takusui Yogo it says that for a person of great bravery who goes straight forward it only takes one single instant to break away from all of our delusions. If a person does not make a determined, courageous effort, they will stay deluded eternally.

While actually sitting down and doing zazen, if we continue to hold on to all of those thoughts, letting them go back and forth even while thinking we should quiet them but not doing it, it means that we just are too caught and we can't be clear. When we sit we need to give it everything we have, and when we work in society we have to give our work everything we have. When we rest we completely rest. In each and every situation and each and every moment we have to have that sharp cutting edge which allows us to be present in the appropriate way for each moment's activity. This cutting edge is very, very important. It is just as the Takusui Yogo sutra says, "For a person of great bravery who goes straight forward it only takes one single instant to break away from all of our delusions. If a person does not make a determined courageous effort, they will stay deluded eternally". Our quiet settled mind is not something that comes to us from somewhere else. No matter what problem comes forth we have to have the courage to cut it away, no matter what it is that comes along.

This is why even while living our daily life, even if we have no specialized training of a religious sort, we can still continue our concentration in one straight line. We can become deeply absorbed in what we are doing. Our mind makes that firm determined commitment by the very doing of this. If we just get pulled around by our feelings and emotions, again and again following them around and caught by them, that will not become zazen. Zazen is letting go of even the most favorite or seemingly important thoughts, and also of the thoughts that confuse us, every single one. To let go of all of these is zazen. We need courage to do this. This is our zazen. Because we do zazen like this even in a short period of zazen our mind becomes settled.

In the olden days they used "single breath zazen", a way to throw ourselves into it even when we don't have time to sit zazen and

when we are smack in the busiest of our busy activities, yet we want to cut away our strong confusion. At that time we have to exhale one long breath as deeply and completely as we possibly can. This is "single breath zazen". With our exhalation we burn up all of our thoughts and all attachment to what we feel is good and bad, painful and pleasurable. We exhale with everything we are. And when we truly breathe out all of it, our essence comes forth and we clear out all of the lingering clutter. Even if it is only for one brief instant we get rid of and go beyond all of our ancient tangled karma. And then, even for that brief moment, we can taste the flavor of the deepest comfort and be fully taut.

If we want to experience this even more, we can do a sesshin and find a teacher. Receive true teaching and then all of the tangled, jammed up things in our mind are cleaned out and put away. We do this and we feel great joy. And for these people the pain in the world holds no fear, we feel this directly.

When we look at it like this we see that zazen is of great importance for those who are very confused. Zazen allows us to let go of that confusion; to not dwell in confusion and darkness. We can then receive everything that comes to us. We can see clearly.

A poem of Ikkyu Zenji says "One inch of incense is one inch of being Buddha. We increase it inch by inch until we are a sixteen foot Buddha"

In just one moment's deep breath zazen, if we are not pushed and pulled by many extraneous thoughts and our own personal confusion, if we don't get caught on our thoughts we can get rid of all of that thinking even for a second. Then, even for that one moment, we are Buddha. If we gather those moments and continue then just as we are, we become Buddha right in the midst of people who are suffering with great despair and misery. Without it we become confused and also fall into hell but with the mind of Buddha we can respond to them. In zazen there is this kind of value and truth and that can be trusted. This is what Ikkyu Zenji was saying with these words.

In Kyoto there is a temple, Tofukuji, which was founded by Shoichi Kokushi. Kujo Michi Eko was a layperson who asked many questions to the founder. Kujo Michi Eko asked how a

layperson could do zen training while still living in the world. He said that even if we do training we won't be able to get enlightened. If we were to make great efforts and train in our everyday life and were not able to realize enlightenment, there would be nothing more disappointing than that!

This is a simple question that everyone wonders about. The Tofukuji founder said that the path of zazen is the path of mysterious liberation. To do severe ascetic practice and endure deliberate suffering is not the goal.

Even if we don't do ascetic practice; if we can become the state of mind of people living in society, then we are becoming the very state of mind of the Buddha. Because this is something that goes beyond mental understanding and explanation it is called the mysterious liberation. This is why if we sit even once and realize this clear mind, we can see that if we just sit without busy thinking, doing only that our mind becomes very settled. How settled we can become! We then see everything and everyone around us clearly and we are very thankful for that. With this our karmic affiliation to satori is strengthened. If for even a single instant we realize this, there is a great result, but if we do that in a daily zazen practice then we see that zazen is the very manifestation of the Buddha's mind. The Buddha's mind is originally that mind which doesn't hold on to any thought whatsoever. From there we realize that there is no need to hold on to an idea of getting enlightened or not getting enlightened. We only need to be right in that mind where there is no need to think about being enlightened or deluded. We are allowed to know that state of mind firmly. This is zazen.

The Buddha did six years of zazen and was enlightened when he saw the morning star. Those six years of sitting and letting go of thoughts, this was the state of mind of the Buddha. Daruma Daishi on Mt. Shuzan near the temple of Shorinji sat for nine years facing the wall and that, just as it was, was the form of enlightenment. To think about how we must have an enlightenment experience is the tug of self-conscious awareness. If we get moved around by that we become even more deluded and that is going further and further astray. Not to be moved around, rather to sit, and whether we are enlightened or not, to not throw away zazen. Sitting free of any thoughts we hold precious the depth of our mind. If we

sit for a period of zazen we are one period of Buddha, if we sit a whole day of zazen we are one day of Buddha. If we sit a whole life of zazen, then aren't we a whole life of Buddha?

A person who lives in this way is a person of great perseverance. This is a person who is a great vessel, a person with a great being and they don't have to have a result or prove something. That is how most people live but that is because they don't know this path. To realize this state of mind where we are not caught on any thinking whatsoever and know this clear mind and live in it, this is the truth of the Buddha's teaching. To actually experience it and believe in it and to live one's whole life based on this is the great person.

This is how Shoichi Kokushi, the Tofukuji founder, taught in a way that all people can understand. Zazen is not something that we do to become saved in some way, but because we are so full of delusions. Even when we go to work everyday, we are full of confused thoughts, even while having all of those confused thoughts, if we sit and are not pulled around by them, when we go out we encounter many things that make us think, but we are not caught on that thinking. Thinking is necessary and we think when we have to, but after that we clean it all up. If we can just learn how to change gears in our mind like that, then just as we are, even with all of our unskillful places and delusions, we can let go of all of them. When letting go of all of these becomes second nature, by that very capability we are liberated. This is, "Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away" This is the way to directly and immediately become Buddha. If we see people doing zazen like this, as we see them doing one sesshin after the next, we see the lines in their faces become more and more clear and bright, while people are almost always caught on something, they instead become round, taut and clear. If we can be in this clear state of mind, we can become like this while doing zazen for a week.

In the State Penitentiary of Arkansas there are prisoners condemned to be executed, or with life sentences. Among these inmates there is one man, Dainin, who received the Buddhist precepts and who writes about how in his former life he lived doing whatever he felt like and because of his emotions he even killed a person. Now he is one of those who

awaits execution. Look carefully at this - he wonders, what ARE we born for? What IS life for? Sitting quietly he finally understands what we are born for, to realize our true character and our original mind. He has become able to see this.

He says, I have lived like an animal up until now, and finally, even though it is too late now, I see that I used the span of my precious life in such an unfortunate way. It was so stupid. Now I want to do what I can for society which is to repent for what I have done and to die for that. I live in daily repentance and that is all that I can do now. Life's meaning is in the deepening of our inner being and with death right in front of me, it makes me live each and every moment clearly, Without upsetting my mind, if I can do that, then in some small way I believe that I can clear the misdeed and I continue to work in that way. I cannot go out and work in the world but I can do this here and now and doing that is my duty. My room, which is the size of three mats, is my zendo. It is my dojo as this person. This is how he spoke.

Our life's goal is to realize our originally clear human character. Letting go of our ego attachments and our thoughts, we become empty. That which has been hidden by our ego attachment, that which is prior to both a mind attached to ego and an ego filter, we are able to realize that true original nature.

“All Sentient Beings are Essentially Buddhas”

Realize this and then for the first time we can really say “all sentient beings are essentially Buddhas”. We don't become a Buddha because we do severe ascetic practices, zazen and training. When we let go of our body and ego awareness, we realize that we are not the ego and that we are something that does not need defending and protecting. This is zazen.

In the DhammaPada the Buddha says that we should not repay hate with hate but should forget it and give love. This is the unchanging truth of the past and present. This is how the Buddha taught.

For Japanese, in the past, to take revenge for your parents or your feudal lord was considered a true ideal and a very respectable thing to do. If there was not any harvest and the year was a poor one, a family might do a traveling show of the story of Chushingura. If

they performed the Chushingura play, then without fail an audience would come. The Chushingura was the story about the feudal lord Asano Takumi no Kami who was bullied by Lord Kirakozuke and then drew his sword against him. Since this happened at the Imperial Palace in Edo, where you are not allowed to unsheath your sword, Lord Asano Takumi no Kami was ordered to commit suicide and died there. All of his knights returned to Akoo palace and were in despair and distress and a great lack of clarity because their lord had died and they had been deranked from Samurai by Imperial edict. From that day on their lives were challenged and they all had to take normal jobs even though they had been of samurai status. They had only lived the life of a samurai, living like high ranking businessmen and now, suddenly they had to do hard labor. Forty-seven of them planned for many years how to revenge their lord. If you put on this play in Japan everyone is deeply impressed and happy to see it again and again.

In that same way, to see people die is always something sad and melancholy, but to leave behind an attachment makes the people who survived feel that they have to take revenge for that lingering pain. Then again, the other side has to repay this revenge and then it brings an eternal cycle repaying revenge with revenge. Unless one side completely forgets and stops it never ends, this is what the Buddha is saying and that is true in the past, the present and the future, and in every direction. Even while saying it is finished when someone dies, it still keeps going. It is not ended by just saying so, and that is too bad. To make our mind free of all lingering clutter and to end that resentment is the teaching of the Buddha. To want it all to be truly clear and clean is humans' deepest prayer. That is why to seek revenge is not as desirable as getting rid of all thoughts about it whatsoever. That is an even greater loyalty, isn't it?

We do the Eko offering chant to allow a person to become a clear mind after death. If the person did not have that chance or karmic affiliation during their life, people who come after them can become empty minded on their behalf, and in their place they soothe the soul of the person who has died. Of course, since the Meiji era, to repay revenge is against the law. Now it is no longer an aesthetic, now peace is the true aesthetic. How can we all know peace? This is what all countries and

nationalities have to make efforts toward and think about most seriously. This is the greatest beauty of all.

In this way human's clear and true mind is empty of any nen, it is beyond birth and death and also that joy beyond, having pierced through life and death. If we can come to understand that, then we can see clearly how "Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away"

The very words that Hakuin Zenji is saying here, if we can understand this, then we can proceed in a clear way and see our interpretation of life in clarity. We can believe in each person's clear mind, repenting our deep misdeeds and forgiving each other. We can then live in the truth and are able to see and understand this.

An email came from someone which told of a child in America who asked a Native American elder what he thought of this recent tragic incident. The elder responded that in his body there are a white and a black wolf and they are fighting. The child then asked which wolf would win. The elder answered, the one that I feed. This is how he answered.

When the Buddha was born it is said that he walked seven and one half steps. That is to say that he, as a human, was expressing our freedom, our right and our responsibility. Then the Buddha is quoted as saying "In all the heavens and on earth there is only One" This is to say that there is nothing that is ordering or controlling us. We are not being told what to do, we have a free choice. There is nothing below us that is controlling us to do bad things either. Humans have the whole responsibility. This is the basic Buddhist belief, that humans are endowed with true splendid compassion and wisdom, that we are human beings endowed with and realizing this compassion and wisdom, is the deepest meaning of our life. The Buddha taught his whole life how we all have this wisdom and compassion and to realize that and live responsibly from it is our mission. Not to be moved right and left by others, instead to guide others away from the great suffering, and to answer challenges from our deep inner clear wisdom. The Buddha taught this truth his whole life and lived that way as well.

The Buddha fulfilled everything he touched. Gautama Siddhartha gave up all of his own personal pleasures, his family, his parents, his right to the throne, all of his possessions and wealth and legacy and fame and rank, he threw it all away. He also threw away his wishes for pleasure, saying that if we linger with those we only end up with great melancholy. No matter how much fame and sweet family life and possessions we have, when we die we have to leave them all behind, no matter how blessed we are materially and with good family. So he sought the answer to the question of what is the true goal. To find this truth he left for the journey. Then when he was 35 years old on the 8th of December he saw the morning star and was suddenly awakened and exclaimed, "How wondrous! How wondrous! All Beings are endowed from the origin with this bright clear mind to which I have just awakened!". That all humans' clear mind is something we are already endowed with - this is what he realized directly. Our possibility of liberation began here.

Yet the Buddha also said that because we have so many attachments and delusions and so much conditioning that we do not realize this clear mind

The reality is that we live in a world full of deep delusion with people conflicting and hurting each other. Even though there is no carpenter who makes carts of death we build them ourselves and ride in them ourselves. But when we do zazen, at least during those moments, we are free from that twisted karma of moving through the six realms of beings. It is not that some finished paradise appears suddenly but that our clarified mind brings that purified perception to all of our surroundings and that bright light that comes from great faith is born. In our awakening our trust in humans is deeply confirmed and with the liberation of others through that trust, we can all live in a pure and perfect land.

The other day I read the words of an Afghan child, "For twenty years since my birth there was no peace. I am a tank, I am a gun, I am all weapons. Their names I know but I don't not know what peace is, I have never seen it. People say that peace is like a bird, it is a bird that only comes when fighting and war is gone. When the peaceful air comes the bird flies to it of its own, but I don't know that kind of peace. But if it should come, I will forget all of those weapon names that I learned."

When we read these words of the Afghanistani children we feel our responsibility even more than ever. A twenty year old youth only knows a world of one war after another and he has never felt a settled place. To offer them a world where war is not necessary, even one day sooner, we have to settle the enemy in our own heart and take seriously this responsibility to first make firm the peace in our own heart. If

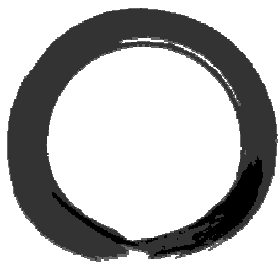
not, we will be attacking and fighting with people continually as well. “Even those who have sat zazen only once will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away.”

In this way Hakuin Zenji teaches us.

For Sesshin information contact sogenji@po.harenet.ne.jp

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One Drop Zendo Association

6499 Wahl Road Freeland, WA 98249

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